RABINDRANATH TAGORE

INDIA'S GENTLE TORCH-BEARER

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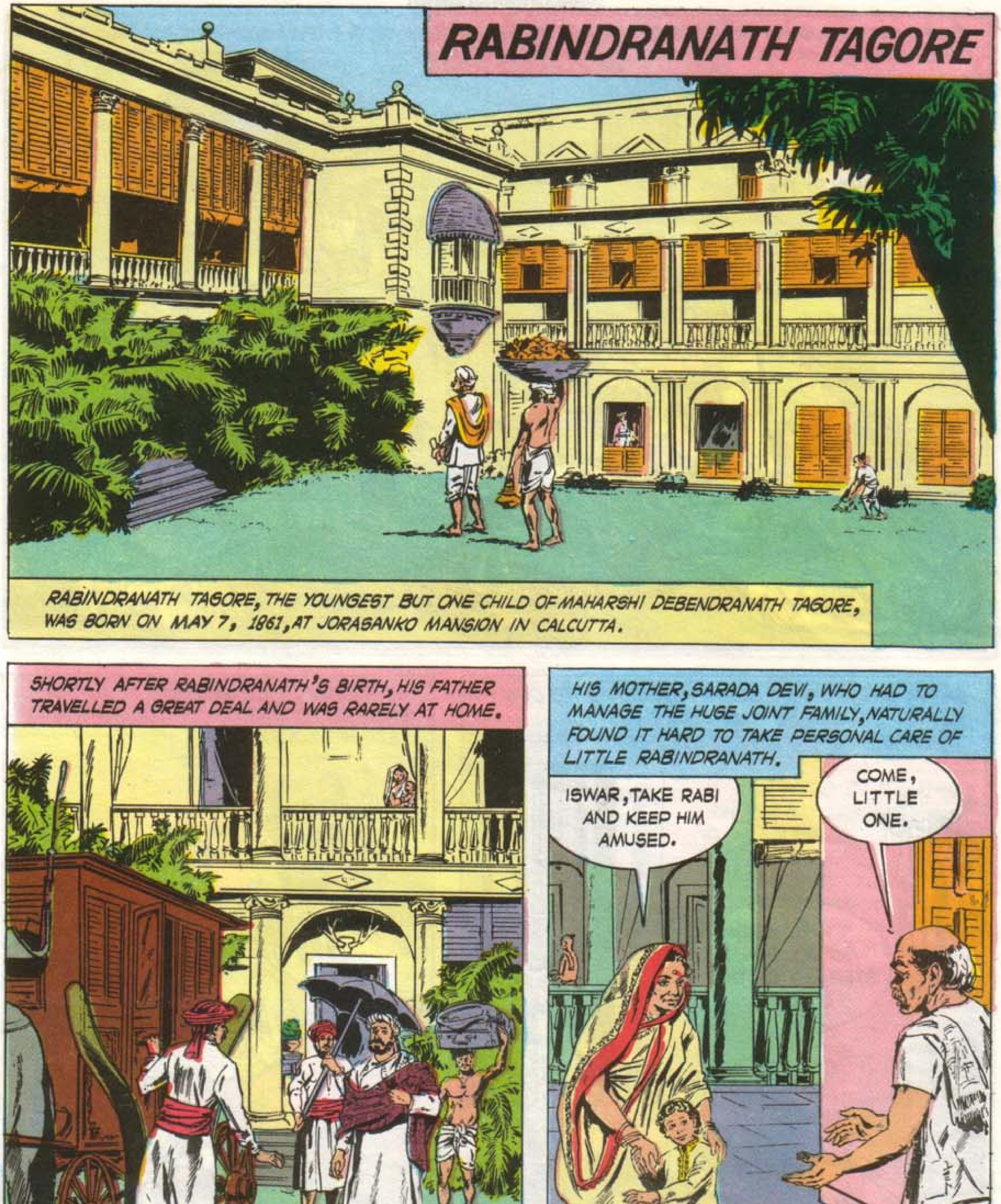
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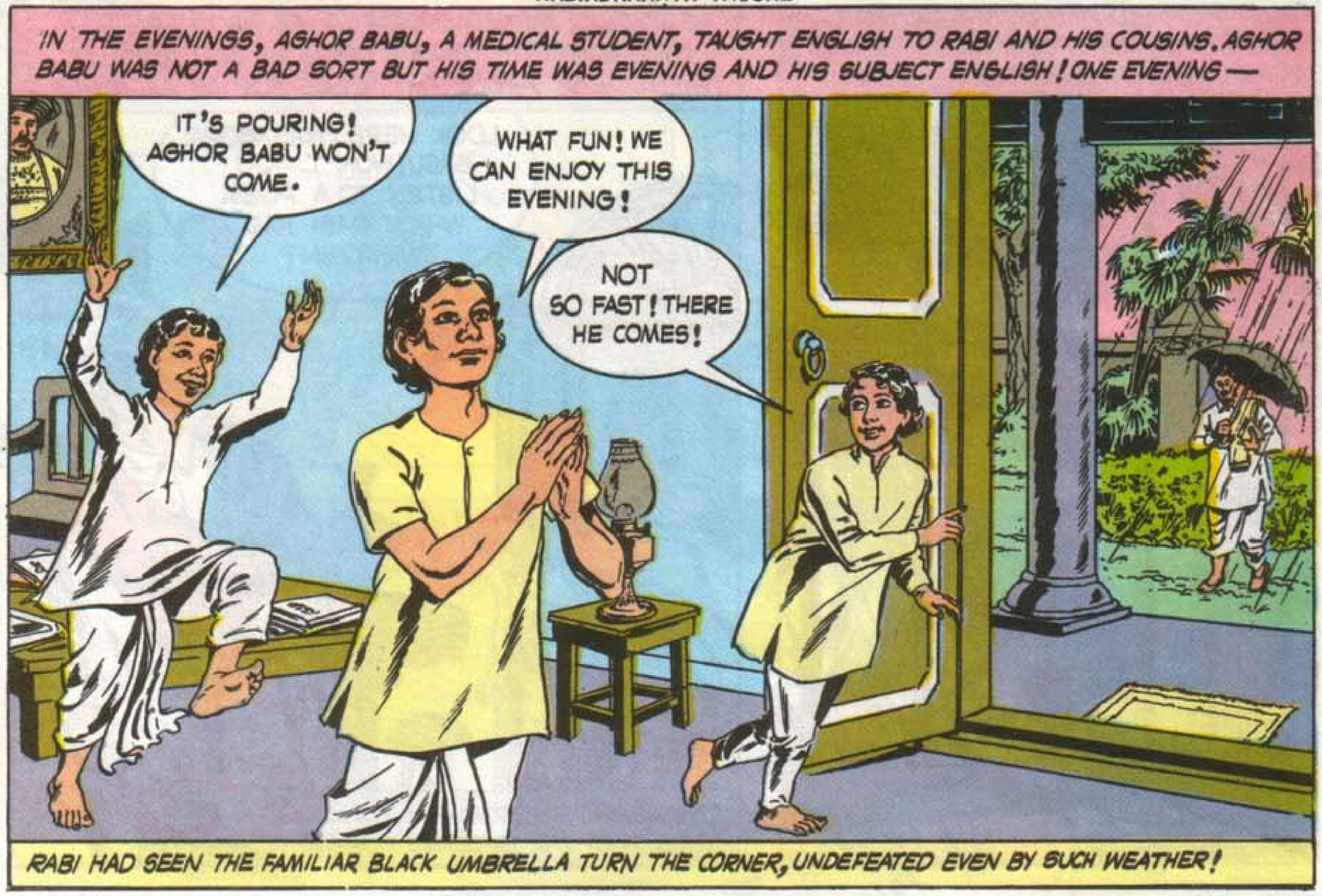
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RABINDRANATH TAGORE
RABINDRANATH TAGORE, THE YOUNGEST BUT ONE CHILD OF MAHARSHI DEBENDRANATH TAGORE, WAS BORN ON MAY 7, 1861, AT JORASANKO MANSION IN CALCUTTA.
SHORTLY AFTER RABINDRANATH'S BIRTH, HIS FATHER TRAVELLED A GREAT DEAL AND WAS RARELY AT HOME.
HIS MOTHER, SARADA DEVI, WHO HAD TO MANAGE THE HUGE JOINT FAMILY, NATURALLY FOUND IT HARD TO TAKE PERSONAL CARE OF LITTLE RABINDRANATH.
ISWAR, TAKE RABI AND KEEP HIM AMUSED.
COME, LITTLE ONE.


EVERY EVENING, ISWAR WOULD READ OUT AND RETELL STORIES FROM THE RAMAYANA TO RABI AND THE OTHER CHILDREN OF THE HOUSEHOLD.
AND WHEN SITA STEPPED OUT OF THE CIRCLE DRAWN BY LAXMANA, SHE WAS CARRIED AWAY BY THE WICKED RAVANA.
SHYAM WAS ANOTHER SERVANT WHO HAD HIS OWN METHOD OF KEEPING RABI UNDER CONTROL.
I HAVE WORK TO DO. DON'T STEP OUT OF THIS CIRCLE.
WHEN THE LITTLE BOY WAS TEMPTED TO STEP OUT OF THE CIRCLE, AN UNKNOWN FEAR WOULD GRIP HIM.
NO, I'D BETTER NOT.


FORTUNATELY, THE PRISON HAD A WINDOW TO THE FREE WORLD OUTSIDE.
HOW I WISH I COULD BE AS FREE AS A BIRD!
FOR THE IMAGINATIVE BOY, LIFE AT SCHOOL WAS DULL.
YOU DULLARDS, REPEAT AFTER ME . . .
AS THE BOYS MECHANICALLY RECITED THEIR LESSONS, RABI WOULD SLIP AWAY INTO THE MORE EXCITING WORLD OF FANTASY.
I AM FACED BY THE ENEMY ON THE BATTLEFIELD. I HAVE NO WEAPONS. BUT THE DOGS, TIGERS AND LIONS, I HAVE TRAINED, FIGHT THE BATTLE FOR ME. AND HURRAH! I AM THE TRIUMPHANT VICTOR! A HERO!


SUDDENLY—
RABI, ARE YOU LISTENING? ANSWER MY QUESTION. IF YOU CAN'T, I'LL CANE YOU.
AND LITTLE RABI WOULD COME DOWN TO EARTH.
AT HOME, THE SCHOOL BECAME HIS MAKE-BELIEVE WORLD WHERE HE WOULD BE THE TEACHER AND THE WOODEN RAILINGS HIS INATTENTIVE STUDENTS.
YOU, THERE! DON'T LOOK OUTSIDE. READ YOUR BOOK.
THIS WILL TEACH YOU TO PAY ATTENTION NEXT TIME.

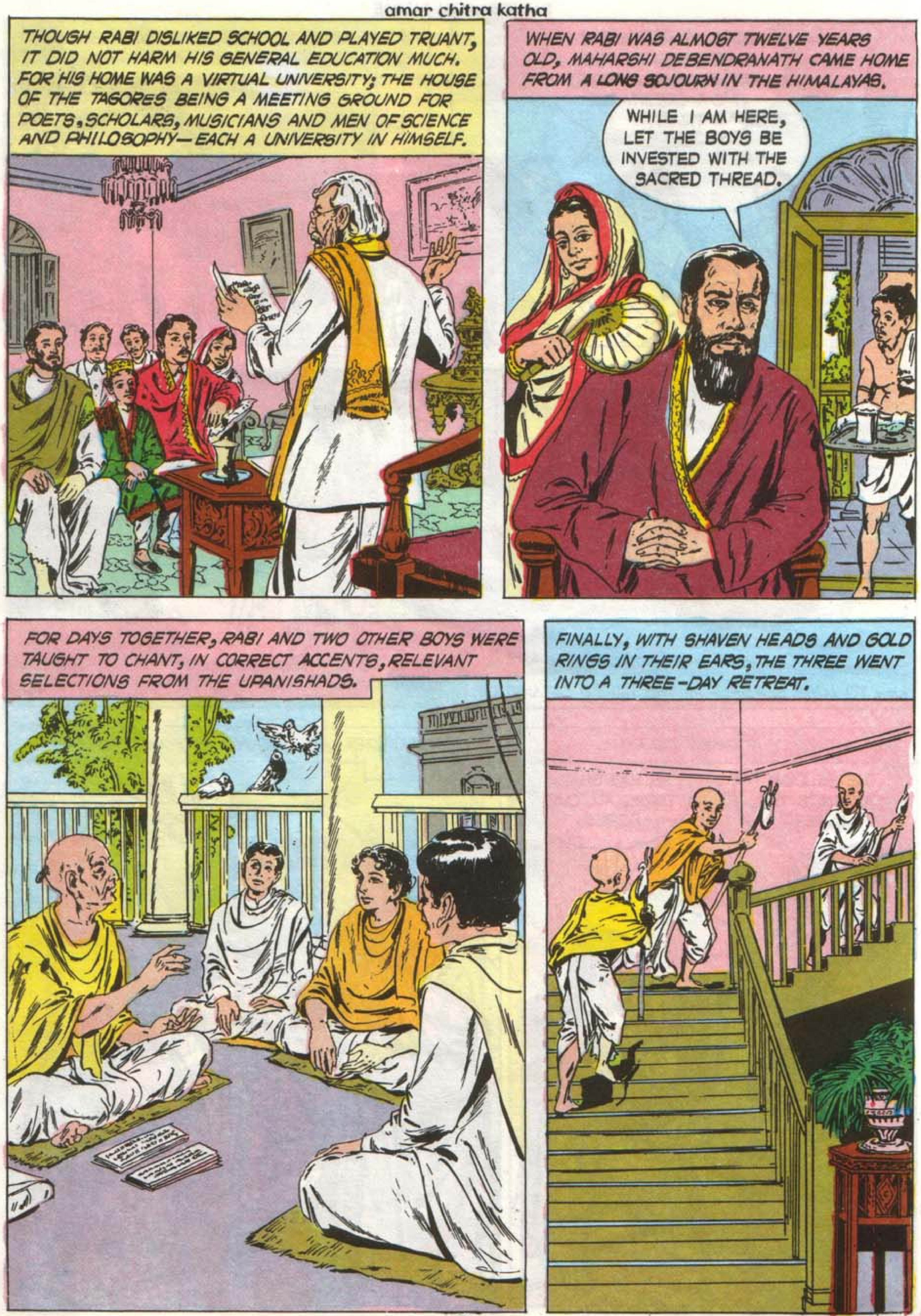

IN THE EVENINGS, AGHOR BABU, A MEDICAL STUDENT, TAUGHT ENGLISH TO RABI AND HIS COUSINS. AGHOR BABU WAS NOT A BAD SORT BUT HIS TIME WAS EVENING AND HIS SUBJECT ENGLISH! ONE EVENING —
IT'S POURING! AGHOR BABU WON'T COME.
WHAT FUN! WE CAN ENJOY THIS EVENING!
NOT SO FAST! THERE HE COMES!
RABI HAD SEEN THE FAMILIAR BLACK UMBRELLA TURN THE CORNER, UNDEFEATED EVEN BY SUCH WEATHER!

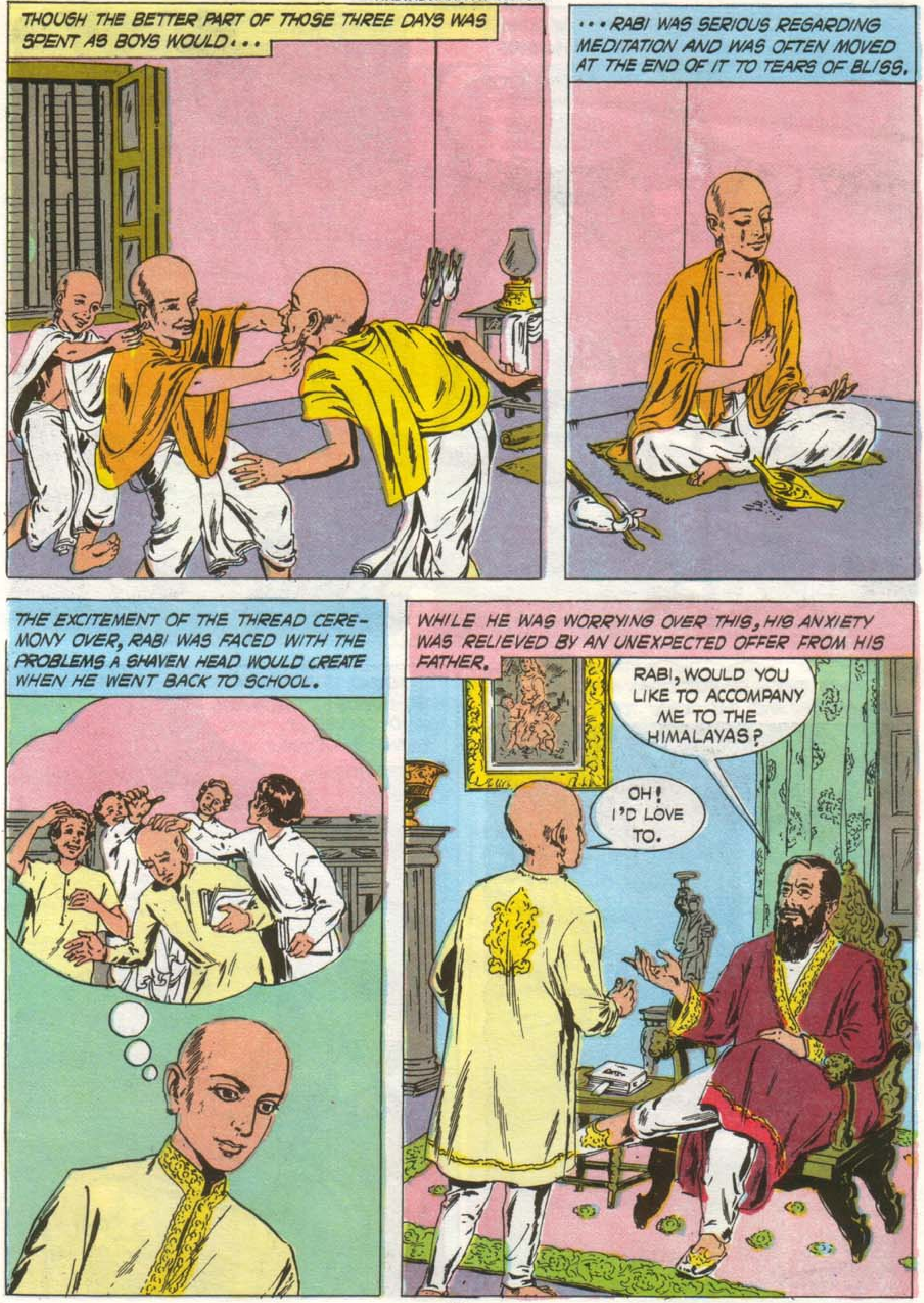

ONE DAY, HOWEVER —
AGHOR BABU WAS HURT IN A CLASH BETWEEN INDIAN AND EURASIAN STUDENTS.
WHICH MEANS HE WON'T COME.
HURRAH! LET US PLAY.
BUT FOR THE BOYS IT WAS ONLY A BRIEF RESPITE. AGHOR BABU'S RECOVERY WAS SWIFT, NEED-LESSLY SWIFT IT SEEMED TO THEM.


AN OLDER NEPHEW, WHO HAD TAKEN A FANCY TO LITTLE RABI, SENT FOR HIM ONE DAY.
RABI, COME ON. YOU ARE GOING TO WRITE POETRY.
YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS. HOW CAN I?


BUT THE SEED WAS SOWN, AND RABI WROTE HIS FIRST POEM WHEN HE WAS HARDLY EIGHT YEARS OLD.
HE FOUND A WARM ADMIRER IN HIS BROTHER JYOTIRINDRANATH, WHOSE PRIDE IN RABI IMPELLED HIM TO HUNT ABOUT THE HOUSE FOR AN AUDIENCE.
LOOK HERE. NABAGOPAL BABU! WON'T YOU LISTEN TO A POEM WHICH RABI HAS WRITTEN?
THE READING FORTHWITH FOLLOWED AND THUS WAS THE BUDDING POET ENCOURAGED.
RABI AND HIS NEPHEW SATHYA WENT TO THE SAME SCHOOL TOGETHER. ONE DAY, AS THEY RETURNED FROM SCHOOL —
GOOD NEWS! GREAT NEWS!
WHAT IS IT? HAVE YOU GOT A PRIZE?
NO. I HAVEN'T, SATHYA HAS.


LOOK AT RABI! HE IS HAPPY BECAUSE HIS NEPHEW GOT A PRIZE! IT'S A CREDITABLE TRAIT.
AS THE SENSITIVE, IMAGINATIVE BOY GREW OLDER, HE OFTEN PLAYED TRUANT...
... TO LOSE HIMSELF IN THE WORLD OF NATURE.
THIS NATURALLY WORRIED HIS FAMILY.
HE SELDOM ATTENDS THE CLASS.
HE HAS SHATTERED ALL OUR HOPES.
BUT JYOTIRINDRANATH AND HIS WIFE KADAMBARI HAD FAITH IN HIM.
HE WRITES BEAUTIFUL POEMS.
HE WILL BE A GREAT POET ONE DAY.


THOUGH RABI DISLIKED SCHOOL AND PLAYED TRUANT, IT DID NOT HARM HIS GENERAL EDUCATION MUCH. FOR HIS HOME WAS A VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY; THE HOUSE OF THE TAGORES BEING A MEETING GROUND FOR POETS, SCHOLARS, MUSICIANS AND MEN OF SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY—EACH A UNIVERSITY IN HIMSELF.
WHEN RABI WAS ALMOST TWELVE YEARS OLD, MAHARSHI DEBENDRANATH CAME HOME FROM A LONG SOJOURN IN THE HIMALAYAS.
WHILE I AM HERE, LET THE BOYS BE INVESTED WITH THE SACRED THREAD.
FOR DAYS TOGETHER, RABI AND TWO OTHER BOYS WERE TAUGHT TO CHANT, IN CORRECT ACCENTS, RELEVANT SELECTIONS FROM THE UPANISHADS.
FINALLY, WITH SHAVEN HEADS AND GOLD RINGS IN THEIR EARS, THE THREE WENT INTO A THREE-DAY RETREAT.


THOUGH THE BETTER PART OF THOSE THREE DAYS WAS SPENT AS BOYS WOULD...
...RABI WAS SERIOUS REGARDING MEDITATION AND WAS OFTEN MOVED AT THE END OF IT TO TEARS OF BLISS.
THE EXCITEMENT OF THE THREAD CEREMONY OVER, RABI WAS FACED WITH THE PROBLEMS A SHAVEN HEAD WOULD CREATE WHEN HE WENT BACK TO SCHOOL.
WHILE HE WAS WORRYING OVER THIS, HIS ANXIETY WAS RELIEVED BY AN UNEXPECTED OFFER FROM HIS FATHER.
RABI, WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACCOMPANY ME TO THE HIMALAYAS?
OH! I'D LOVE TO.

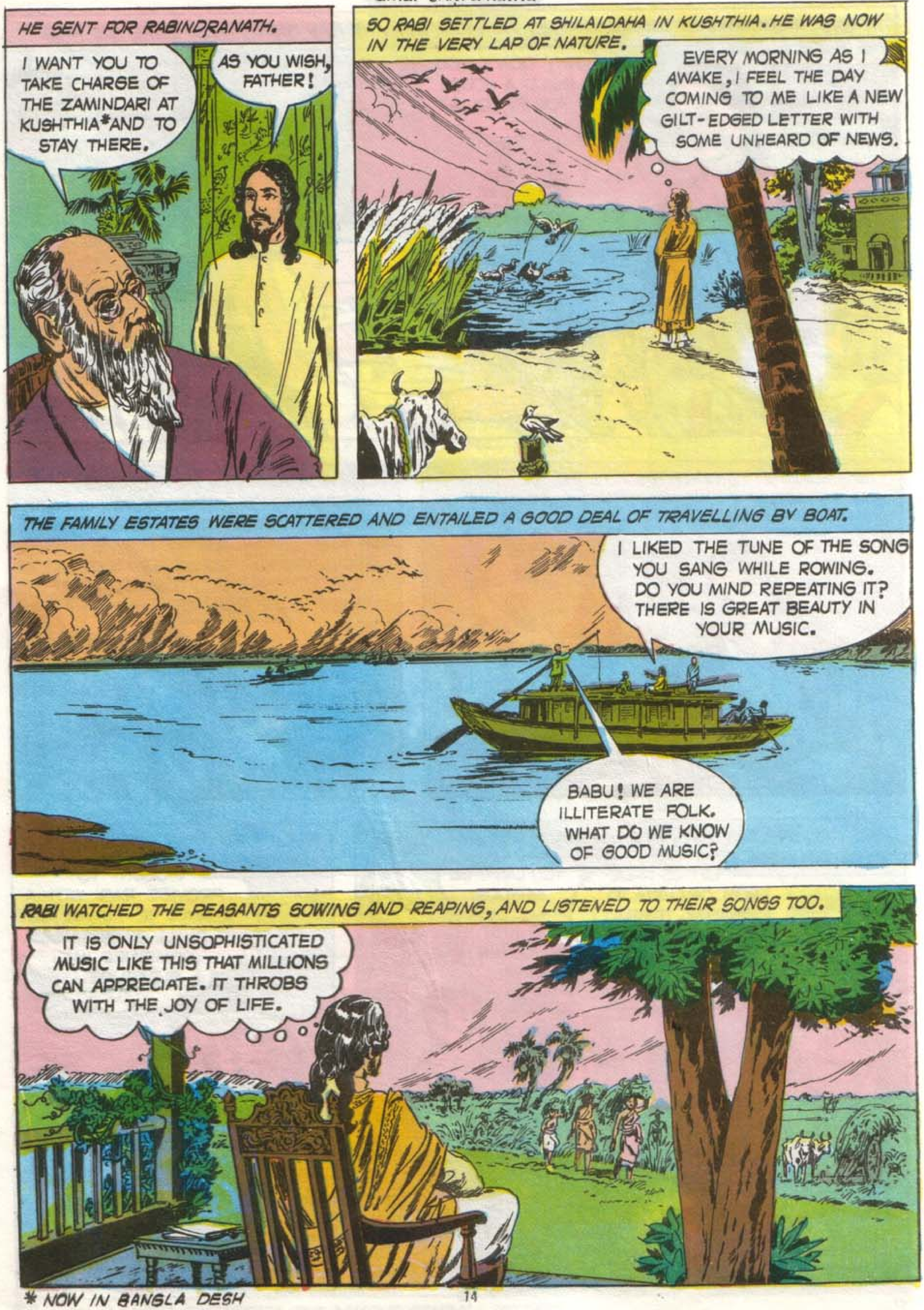

FATHER AND SON CAMPED AT SHANTI NIKETAN NEAR BOLPUR, EN ROUTE TO THE HIMALAYAS.
FATHER, WHY DO YOU CALL THIS PLACE SHANTI NIKETAN?
IT'S A LONG STORY, RABI. I WAS TRAVELLING TO RAIPUR BY PALANQUIN...
"ON THE WAY—
WHAT AN ENCHANTING PLACE! LET ME REST HERE.
" I MADE THE MEN PUT DOWN THE PALANQUIN AND SAT DOWN TO MEDITATE."
I FOUND IT PEACEFUL. SO I BOUGHT THE PLACE, AND CALLED IT SHANTI NIKETAN.


FROM SHANTI NIKETAN, THEY WENT TO AMRITSAR AND FROM THERE TO THE HIMALAYAS. IN THE EVENING, RABI WOULD SING SONGS TO HIS FATHER.
AS NIGHT FELL AND THE STARS BLAZED OUT—
THAT IS THE POLE STAR. CAN YOU SEE IT?
YES, FATHER.
RABI'S EYES HAD NO REST THE LIVELONG DAY, SO GREAT WAS HIS FEAR LEST ANYTHING SHOULD ESCAPE HIM.
AFTER HIS RETURN FROM THE HIMALAYAS, HE CONTINUED WITH HIS COMPOSITION OF POETRY. ONE DAY AT CHINSURA, NEAR CALCUTTA, HE SANG SOME OF HIS SONGS TO HIS FATHER.
DEBENDRANATH TAGORE WAS VERY HAPPY.
IF THE KING OF THE COUNTRY HAD KNOWN THE LANGUAGE AND COULD APPRECIATE ITS LITERATURE, HE WOULD DOUBTLESS HAVE REWARDED THE POET. SINCE THAT IS NOT SO, I SUPPOSE I MUST DO IT.
THE REWARD WAS A CHEQUE FOR FIVE HUNDRED RUPEES!



*BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE. THE FAMOUS BENGALI WRITER.


IN 1883, RABINDRANATH TAGORE MARRIED MRINALINI DEVI. HE WAS TWENTY-TWO YEARS OLD AND HIS BRIDE, ELEVEN.
WHY DON'T YOU BUILD A HOUSE FOR MY DOLLS?
TAGORE BEGAN TO TEACH HIS WIFE BENGALI AND SANSKRIT.
FOUR MONTHS AFTER HIS WEDDING, RABINDRANATH'S BELOVED SISTER-IN-LAW, KADAMBARI DEVI, DIED. THE TRAGEDY HIT THE VERY DEPTHS OF THE POET'S SENSITIVE SOUL. THE SONGS HE COMPOSED IN THE MONTHS THAT FOLLOWED WERE INTENSE WITH FEELING.
ONE DAY, EARLY IN 1890, RABINDRANATH HAD A STRANGE WISH.
LET US WALK FROM CALCUTTA TO PESHAWAR. IT WILL ENRICH OUR STORE OF EXPERIENCES.
YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS.
IT'S JUST ONE OF HIS WHIMS.
WHEN HIS FATHER HEARD OF THIS, HOWEVER—
I OUGHT TO PROVIDE RABI WITH A CHANCE TO TRAVEL. BUT IT SHALL BE BUSINESS COMBINED WITH PLEASURE.



* NOW IN BANGLA DESH


THE PEASANTS LOVED RABINDRANATH THE ZAMINDAR FOR HIS SYMPATHETIC APPROACH TO THEIR PROBLEMS.
THE RAINS HAVE FAILED US THIS SEASON. YOU NEED NOT PAY YOUR RENT THIS YEAR.
HE SPENT THE EVENINGS ON THE RIVER PADMA, GIVING EXPRESSION TO HIS THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS.
HOW SILENT AND SERENE IS PADMA! I WISH MY MIND WERE AS PEACEFUL.
THOUGH HE DID WRITE A GREAT DEAL DURING THIS PERIOD, HIS PROXIMITY TO THE ILLITERATE PEASANT FOLK TURNED HIS MIND TO OTHER SPHERES.
I FEEL FOR MY COUNTRYMEN. WHEN WILL THEY GET RID OF THEIR SUPERSTITIONS AND FEARS? WHEN WILL THEY KNOW A BETTER LIFE?
WITH THE SPREAD OF EDUCATION EVERYTHING WILL BE ALL RIGHT.
THE EDUCATION THEY WILL RECEIVE IN SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES? NO. I DON'T THINK THAT WILL BREAK THE CHAINS BINDING THEM. IT HELPS THEM TO GET JOBS. THAT IS ALL.


WANTING A WIDER FIELD FOR HIS ACTIVITIES, HE CAME BACK TO CALCUTTA AND SPOKE TO HIS FATHER.
RABI, YOU CAN HAVE THE LAND AROUND SHANTI NIKETAN, AT BOLPUR.
THANK YOU, FATHER. I WANT TO START AN ASHRAM* THERE.
HE COULD HARDLY SLEEP; SO FULL WAS HE OF HIS FUTURE PLANS.
I'LL START A SCHOOL THERE WHERE BOYS WILL BREATHE A FREER AIR AND LEARNING WILL BE A JOY. A SCHOOL I NEVER KNEW.
MRINALINI DEVI, HIS WIFE, STOOD BY HIM.
I WOULD LIKE TO LIVE HERE, IF YOU AGREE. WE CAN VISIT CALCUTTA OCCASIONALLY.
THAT WOULD BE LOVELY. WE COULD PLANT MORE TREES AND...

* RETREAT


ON DECEMBER 22, 1901 HE INAUGURATED THE SCHOOL AT SHANTI NIKETAN. IT BEGAN WITH A FEW BOYS AND TEACHERS ON THE MODEL OF AN ASHRAM IN NATURAL SURROUNDINGS. RABINDRANATH HIMSELF TAUGHT THERE.
IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, PLEASE DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK ME. I'LL EXPLAIN IT TO YOU AGAIN.
THAT'S ENOUGH FOR TODAY. COME, WE WILL STAGE A PLAY NOW.
CHILDREN ARE BORN WITH A NATURAL CURIOSITY WHICH, IF PROPERLY ENCOURAGED, MAKES THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE A PLEASURE. AND A PLEASURE IT WAS FOR THE BOYS AT SHANTI NIKETAN.


THERE WERE REASONS FOR IT. HIS LIBERAL VIEWS ANTAGONISED THE BRAHMO SAMAJISTS.
HE HAS TOO MUCH SYMPATHY WITH ORTHODOX HINDU VIEWS.
LET US NOT SEND OUR CHILDREN TO HIS SCHOOL.
AS FOR THE ORTHODOX HINDUS —
HE IS A BRAHMO.
OUR CHILDREN TO STUDY IN THE SCHOOL OF A BRAHMO? NEVER!
THOSE WHO WERE NOT CONCERNED WITH IDEOLOGIES, HAD OTHER REASONS.
HIS SCHOOL IS NEITHER RECOGNISED BY THE CALCUTTA UNIVERSITY NOR BY THE GOVERNMENT. WHAT'S THE USE OF AN EDUCATION THAT WON'T HELP OUR CHILDREN GET JOBS?
RABINDRANATH'S COLLEAGUES WERE WORRIED.
RABI BABU! OUR FUNDS ARE EXHAUSTED.
DON'T WORRY, I WILL SELL MY BOOKS TO RAISE FUNDS.


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RABI BABU! OUR FUNDS ARE EXHAUSTED.
DON'T WORRY, I WILL SELL MY BOOKS TO RAISE FUNDS.


BUT THE SITUATION DID NOT IMPROVE.
WILL I HAVE TO CLOSE THE SCHOOL?
YOU LOOK WORRIED THESE DAYS. WON'T YOU TELL ME WHAT IS BOTHERING YOU?
IT'S THE SCHOOL. WE ARE SHORT OF FUNDS.
THE SALE OF THESE SHOULD GIVE YOU ENOUGH MONEY.
YOUR ORNAMENTS! NO! I CAN'T TAKE THEM.
WHY NOT? THEY ARE YOURS.



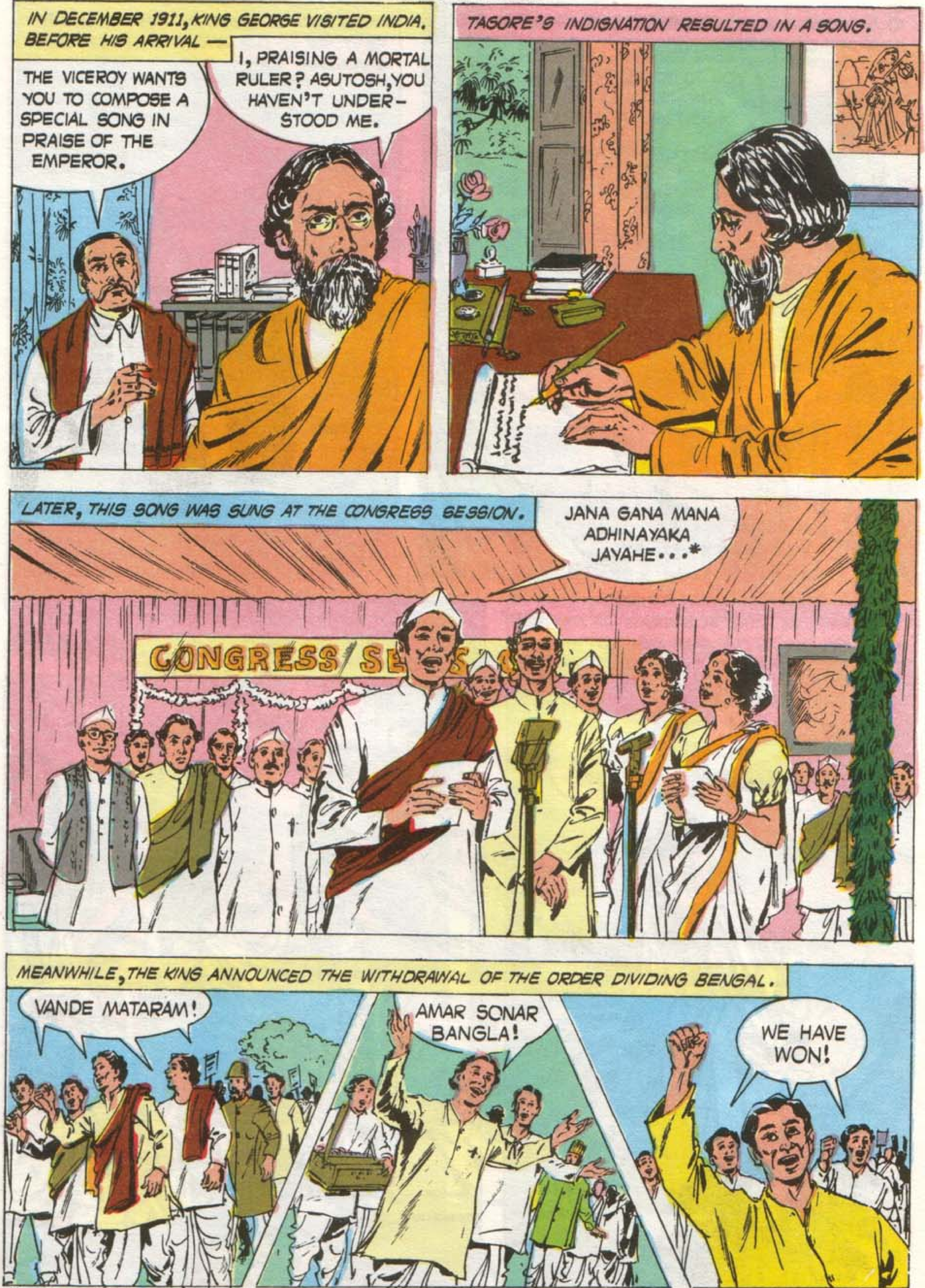
* RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL, WHEN FRATERNAL TIES ARE STRENGTHENED BY THE TYING OF THE SYMBOLIC THREAD, RAAKHI

⊕ DASSERA



* MY GOLDEN BENGAL, I LOVE YOU

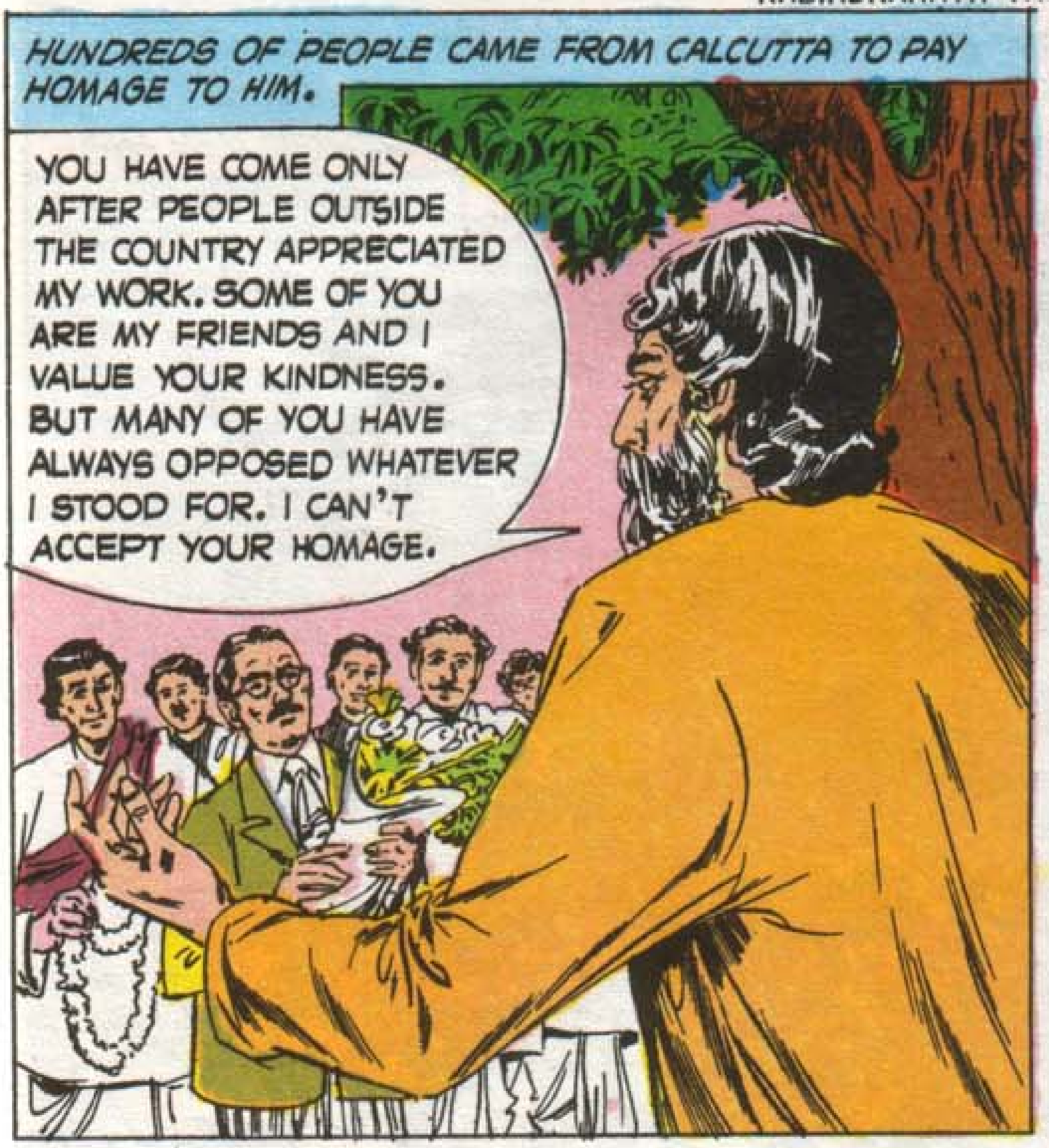

TO IMPROVE FARMING TECHNIQUES, HE ENLISTED THE SUPPORT OF HIS SON.
RATHINDRA, I WANT YOU TO GO TO THE U.S.A. FOR TRAINING IN AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE.
I WILL GLADLY GO, FATHER.
WHEN RATHINDRANATH RETURNED, TAGORE SENT HIM TO THE ANCESTRAL ESTATE AT SHILAIDAH.
THE FARMERS WERE SUSPICIOUS OF THE NEW METHODS. BUT AS THE DAYS WENT BY—
SO MUCH WORK IN SO LITTLE TIME!
THANKS TO RABI BABU!
A STAUNCH SUPPORTER OF WIDOW REMARRIAGE, RABINDRANATH MARRIED HIS SON IN 1910, TO A YOUNG WIDOW, PRATIMA DEVI.



* TODAY OUR NATIONAL ANTHEM.

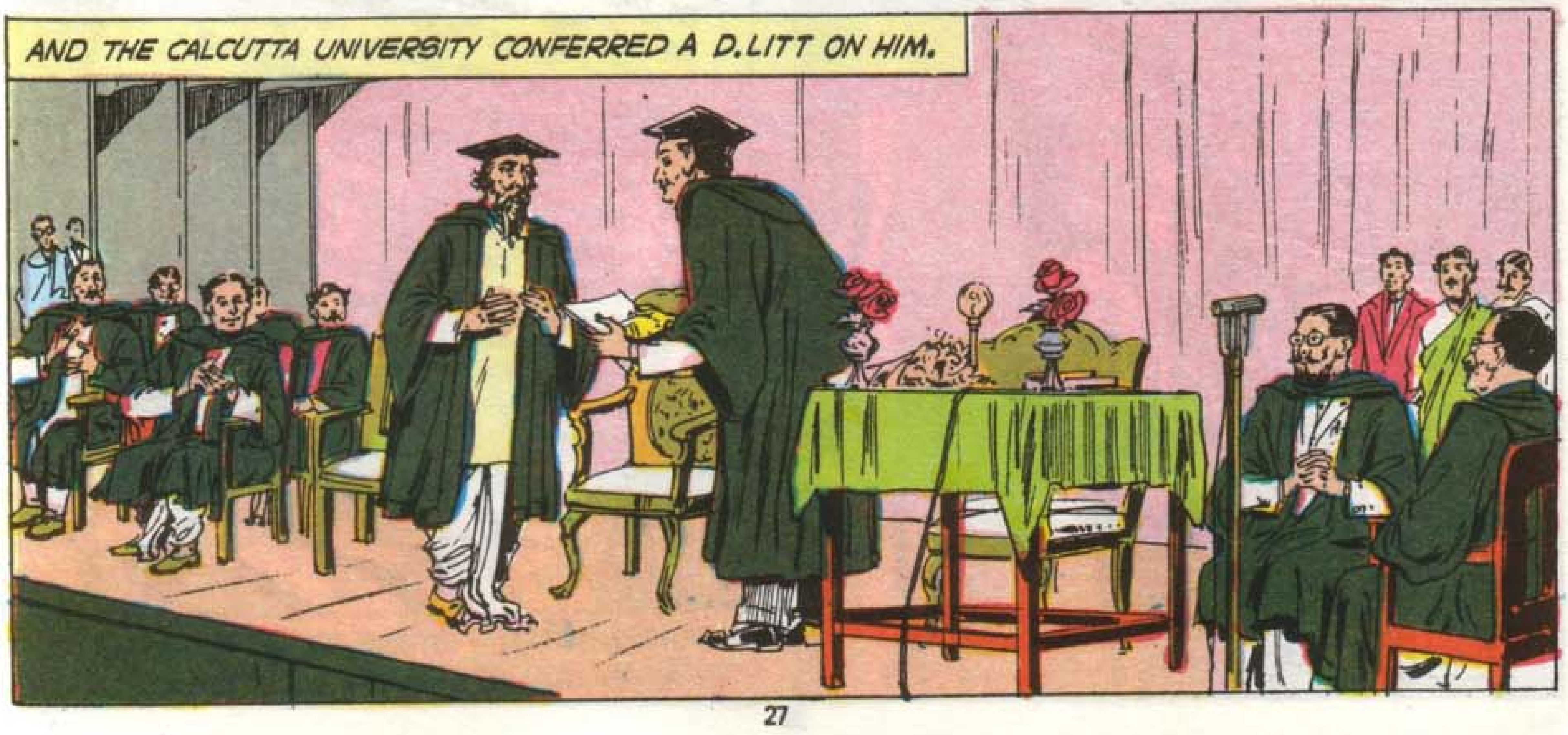

HIS WORKS WON HIM MANY ADMIRERS ABROAD. WHEN HE WENT TO ENGLAND —
WHY DON'T YOU TRANSLATE YOUR "GITANJALI" INTO ENGLISH?
THE SUGGESTION WAS FROM ROTHENSTEIN, THE FAMOUS ENGLISH PAINTER.
WHEN THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION WAS READY, THE GREAT POET W. B. YEATS WAS FULL OF PRAISE.
TAGORE'S POETRY HAS STIRRED MY SOUL AS NOTHING HAS IN YEARS.
WHEN HE RETURNED TO INDIA, HE FOUND THAT MANY ENVIED HIM. ONE DAY —
RABI BABU, HAVE YOU SEEN THE MATRICULATION PAPER OF CALCUTTA UNIVERSITY? A PASSAGE FROM YOUR WORK HAS BEEN SET WITH THE INJUNCTION "REWRITE IN CHASTE BENGALI."
LET THAT NOT DISTURB YOU.
NOT ALL AT CALCUTTA UNIVERSITY, HOWEVER, HAD THIS OPINION OF RABINDRANATH'S BENGALI. SIR ASUTOSH MUKHERJI, VICE-CHANCELLOR, THOUGHT HIGHLY OF IT AND WANTED TO CONFER AN HONORARY DEGREE ON HIM.
I PROPOSE THAT WE CONFER A D.LITT ON RABINDRANATH TAGORE.
NO! NO!


UNMINDFUL OF THE RIDICULE, RABINDRANATH CONTINUED HIS WORK AT SHANTI NIKETAN. ON THE EVENING OF NOVEMBER 15, 1912 —
GURUDEV!
WHAT'S THE MATTER?
A TELEGRAM FROM SWEDEN! YOU HAVE BEEN AWARDED THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE! FOR GITANJALI! £8,000.
HIS FRIENDS AND FOLLOWERS WERE HAPPY.
HE IS OUR PRIDE.
HE IS THE FIRST ASIAN TO RECEIVE THE NOBEL PRIZE.
TAGORE HIMSELF WAS HAPPY, FOR A DIFFERENT REASON.
NOW I HAVE ALL THE FUNDS I NEED FOR SHANTI NIKETAN!

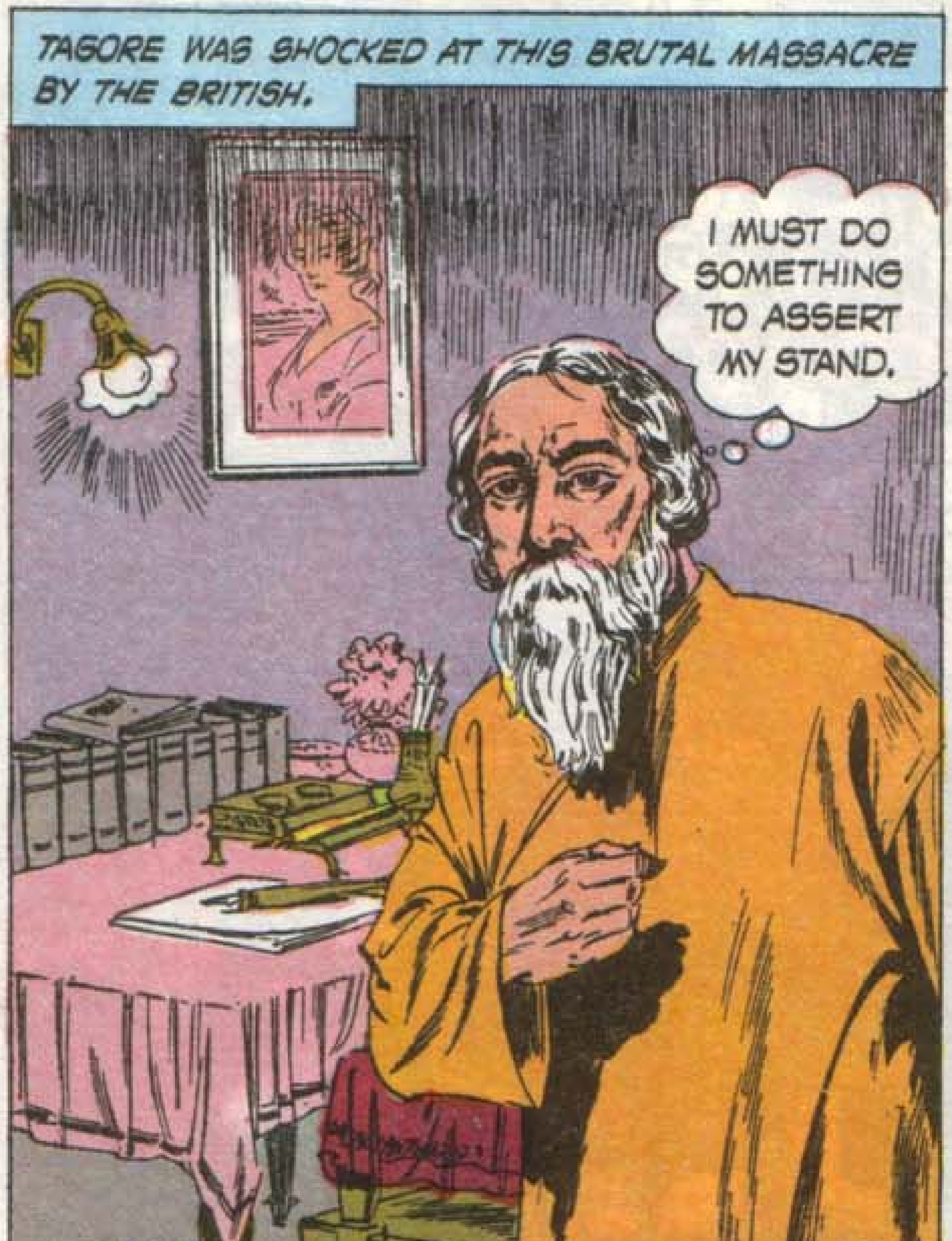

HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE CAME FROM CALCUTTA TO PAY HOMAGE TO HIM.
YOU HAVE COME ONLY AFTER PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY APPRECIATED MY WORK. SOME OF YOU ARE MY FRIENDS AND I VALUE YOUR KINDNESS. BUT MANY OF YOU HAVE ALWAYS OPPOSED WHATEVER I STOOD FOR. I CAN'T ACCEPT YOUR HOMAGE.

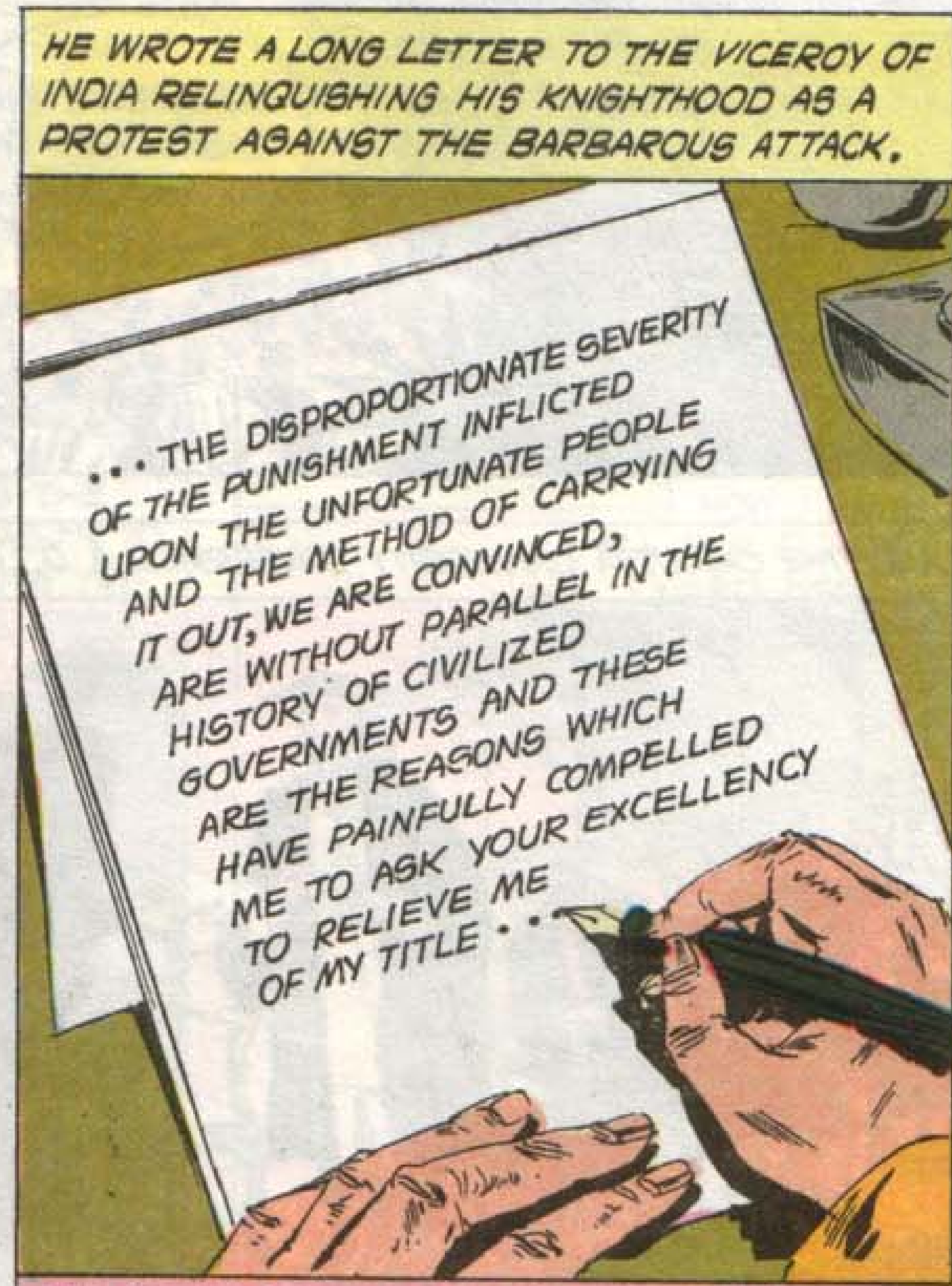

BUT LATER, WHEN HE WAS ALONE, HE FELT UNHAPPY.
LORD! GRIND DOWN THIS 'I' IN ME. LET ME LOVE ALL.


THE KING CONFERRED A KNIGHTHOOD ON HIM. THE CROWD THAT GATHERED AT TAGORE'S HOUSE IN CALCUTTA WAS LARGE.
LONG LIVE SIR RABINDRANATH TAGORE!


AND THE CALCUTTA UNIVERSITY CONFERRED A D.LITT ON HIM.

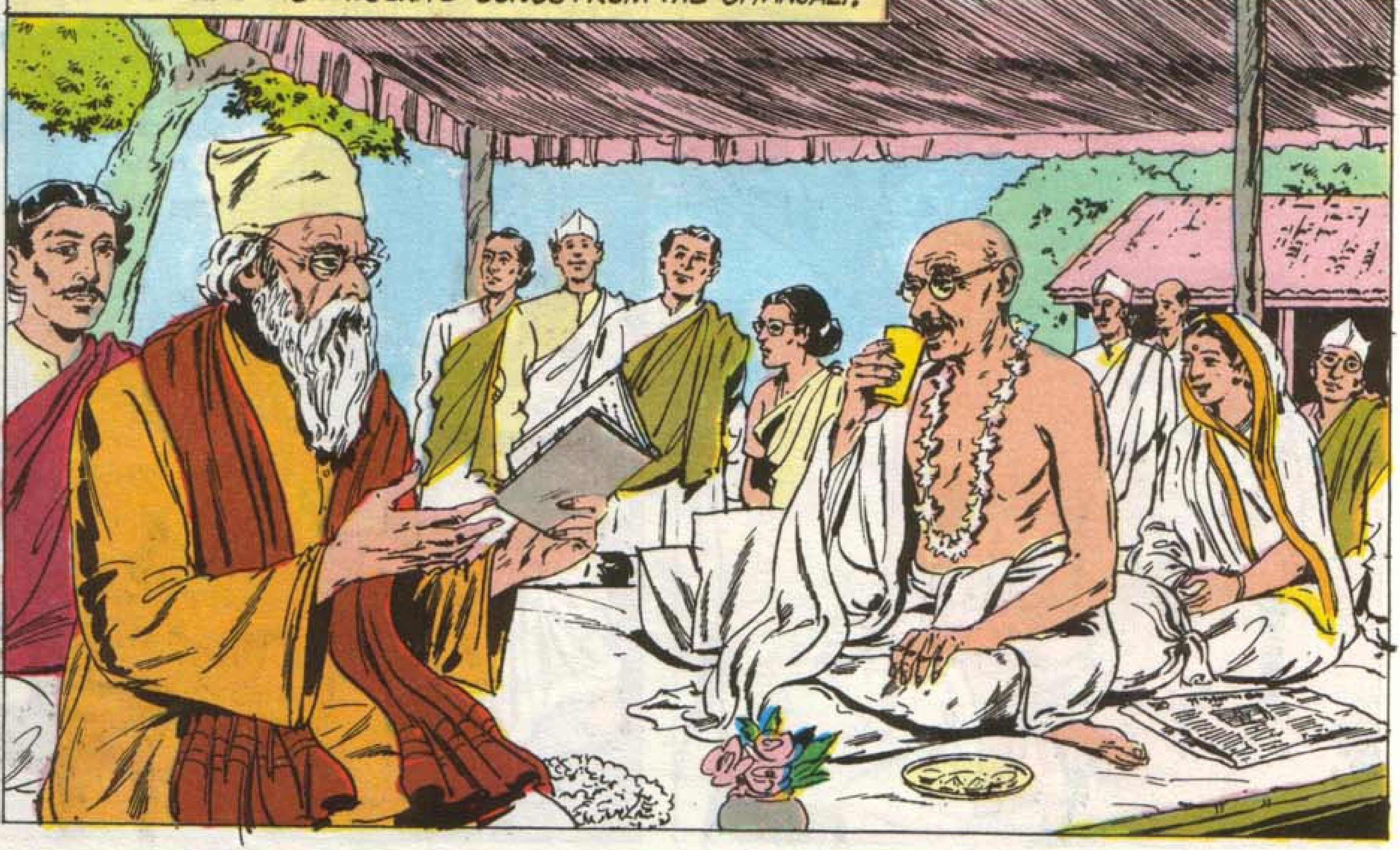

RABINDRANATH WAS DEEPLY INVOLVED IN HIS GREAT EXPERIMENTS IN EDUCATION AT SHANTI NIKETAN. BUT HE COULD NOT KEEP HIMSELF ALOOF FROM POLITICAL HAPPENINGS. THE OPPRESSIVE MEASURES OF THE BRITISH HAD MADE MAHATMA GANDHI GIVE THE CALL FOR HARTAL IN 1919. SEVERAL HUNDRED MEN AND WOMEN HAD GATHERED AT JALLIANWALA BAUG, IN THE PUNJAB. SUDDENLY —


TAGORE WAS SHOCKED AT THIS BRUTAL MASSACRE BY THE BRITISH.
I MUST DO SOMETHING TO ASSERT MY STAND.

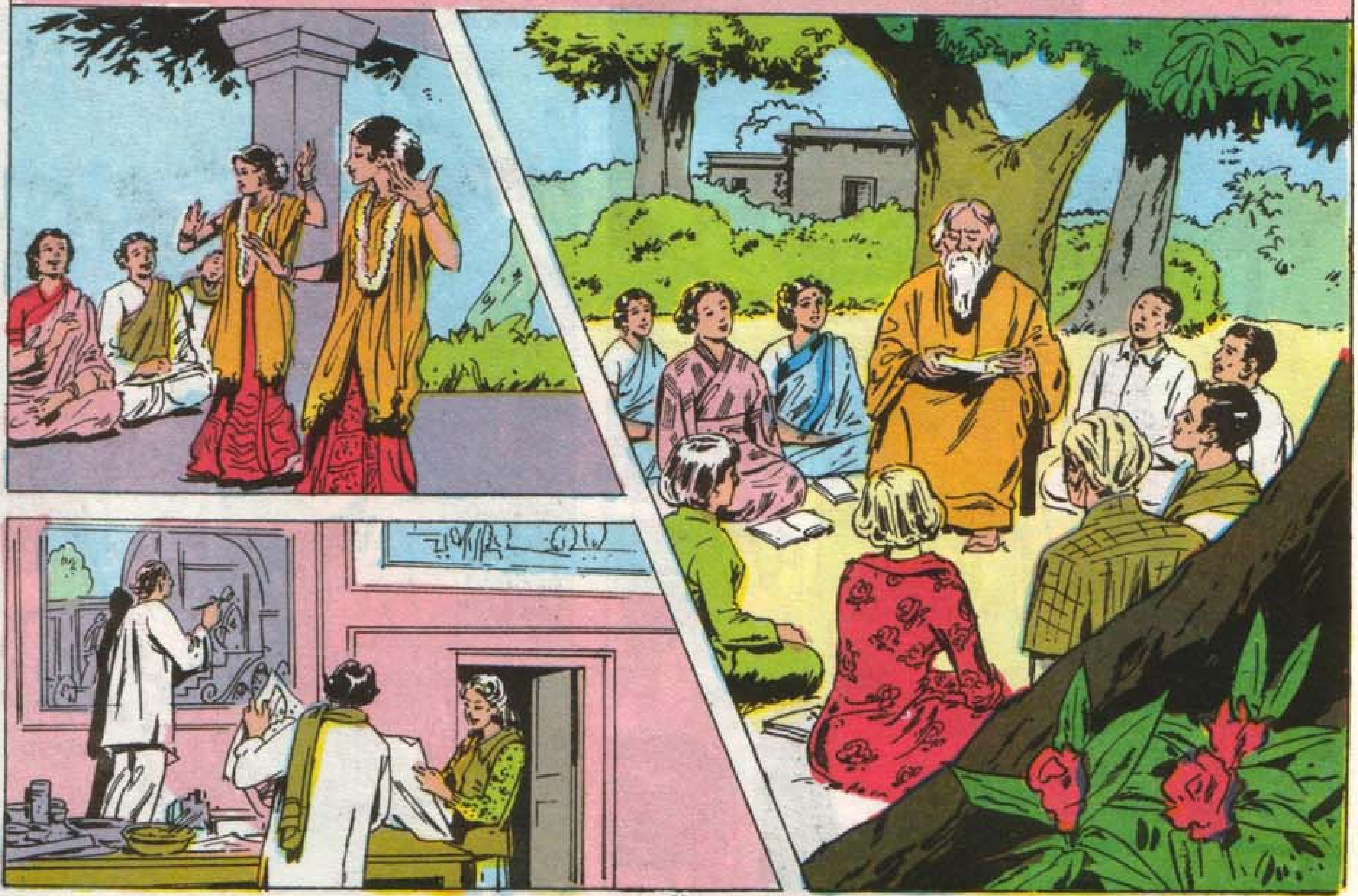

HE WROTE A LONG LETTER TO THE VICEROY OF INDIA RELINQUISHING HIS KNIGHTHOOD AS A PROTEST AGAINST THE BARBAROUS ATTACK.
... THE DISPROPORTIONATE SEVERITY OF THE PUNISHMENT INFLICTED UPON THE UNFORTUNATE PEOPLE AND THE METHOD OF CARRYING IT OUT, WE ARE CONVINCED, ARE WITHOUT PARALLEL IN THE HISTORY OF CIVILIZED GOVERNMENTS AND THESE ARE THE REASONS WHICH HAVE PAINFULLY COMPELLED ME TO ASK YOUR EXCELLENCY TO RELIEVE ME OF MY TITLE ...
HIS RENUNCIATION OF THE KNIGHTHOOD WAS DECLINED BUT HE STOPPED USING THE TITLE.


ONE DAY, IN 1932 —
GURUDEV, THE GOVERNMENT HAS DECIDED TO AWARD SEPARATE REPRESENTATION TO HARIJANS.
THAT WOULD WIDEN THE GULF BETWEEN CASTE HINDUS AND HARIJANS.
SOME DAYS LATER —
GURUDEV, MAHATMAJI HAS GONE ON A FAST UNTO DEATH OPPOSING THE COMMUNAL AWARD.
HE HAS NO OTHER COURSE OPEN TO HIM.
TAGORE CALLED A MEETING OF THE RESIDENTS OF SHANTI NIKETAN.
LET US PRAY TO THE ALMIGHTY TO GIVE MAHATMAJI STRENGTH FOR THE ORDEAL AND TO BRING HIM SAFELY THROUGH.
TAGORE LEFT CALCUTTA FOR YERAVADA TO STAND BY THE MAHATMA IN THE HOUR OF NEED.

THE GOVERNMENT WAS FORCED TO AGREE TO THE MAHATMA'S DEMAND FOR A COMMON ELECTORATE BETWEEN CASTE HINDUS AND HARIJANS. THE MAHATMA BROKE HIS FAST BY SIPPING LIME JUICE, WITH TAGORE SINGING HIS FAVOURITE SONGS FROM THE GITANJALI.



NOW THAT RABINDRANATH HAD ATTAINED WORLD FAME, SHANTI NIKETAN BECAME A CENTRE OF PILGRIMAGE NOT ONLY FOR INDIANS, BUT FOR PEOPLE OF OTHER COUNTRIES AS WELL.



MONEY TOO POURED IN FROM ALL SIDES. THE ROYALTIES FROM THE ENGLISH EDITIONS OF HIS BOOKS WERE SUBSTANTIAL. NOT ONLY WAS THE EDUCATION GIVEN AT SHANTI NIKETAN RECOGNISED, BUT IT WAS CONSIDERED A GREAT PRIVILEGE TO BE ABLE TO STUDY THERE. JAWAHARLAL NEHRU WAS ONE OF THE MANY THAT WERE IMPRESSED BY TAGORE'S EDUCATIONAL METHODS.



RABINDRANATH TAGORE LIVED TO THE RIPE OLD AGE OF EIGHTY. THE MAN WHOSE BENGALI WAS CONSIDERED BAD IS TODAY CALLED THE FATHER OF MODERN BENGALI LITERATURE. HIS WORKS ARE READ ALL OVER THE WORLD. PERHAPS HIS MOST ENDURING CONTRIBUTION IS HIS COLLECTION OF SONGS, WHICH WILL BE SUNG FOR AGES TO COME.